

MEMOIR OF DR. WILLIAM S. FORBES

BY

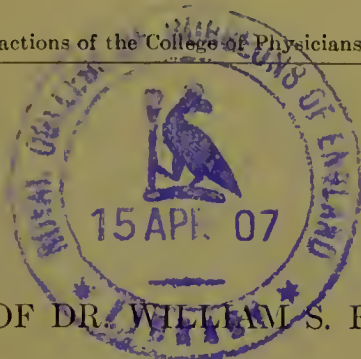
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MEMOIR OF DR. WILLIAM S. FORBES.¹

By FREDERICK P. HENRY, M.D.

It would have been characteristic of the subject of this memoir if, on being consulted concerning its character and scope, he had replied in the words of Othello:

"Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice."

This is what I propose to do, and it is a congenial task, for after a careful review of his life, and especially of that period of storm and stress which many here present can recall, I have found nothing to extenuate. As to malice, there is little likelihood of that from one who was his own familiar friend in whom he trusted.

In preparing this memoir I have become more firmly established in an opinion that I have often expressed: viz., that it is the duty of every man to bequeath to his family a personal record of the principal events of his life. Such documents are rare and are often more highly prized by their fortunate possessors than any amount of so-called personal or real estate. There are certain episodes of Dr. Forbes' life, notably his student days in this city, the circumstances attending his election as resident physician to the Pennsylvania Hospital, and his voyage to the Crimea, concerning which no one but himself could give complete details. Time and again he has spoken of them to me, perhaps more fully than to any one else, and I now regret that they were not more deeply impressed upon my memory. Even if I had foreseen that I would be chosen to act as his biographer I could not have played the part of Boswell:

¹ Read January 2, 1907.

a species of character which, in my opinion, is incapable of true, *i. e.*, disinterested friendship.

William Smith Forbes was born at Falmouth, Stafford County, near Fredericksburg, Virginia, on the tenth of February, 1831, and was the son of the late Murray Forbes and Sallie Innes (Thornton) Forbes. His grandfather, the first of the family to come to America, was Dr. David Forbes, of Edinburgh (of the Bitsligo branch of Forbes), who married in 1774 and settled in Dumfries, Virginia. His wife was Margaret Stirling, of Dunbarton Castle on the river Clyde, and, as I am informed by Mr. David Forbes, of Fredericksburg, Va., her family possess letters from James V of Scotland, written in 1534, to William Stirling and from Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1545, to George Stirling, expressing their thanks for its successful defence. Through his mother, Sallie Innes Thornton, the subject of this memoir was descended from a family that had been established in America since the year 1657.

Dr. Forbes never spoke to me of his ancestry. He was not a man to make parade of crests and coats of arms, and although a believer in pedigree, as every one must be who has observed its influence throughout the entire animal kingdom, he set manhood above it, and held with the national poet of Scotland that

"The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that!"

Dr. Forbes received his early educational training at the Fredericksburg and Concord Academies, in which he was well grounded in the classics. He began his medical studies under Dr. George Carmichael and attended medical lectures at the University of Virginia, in 1850-51. He completed his medical course at the Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, and while attending lectures, was an office student of the late Dr. Joseph Pancoast, at that time Professor of Anatomy in the same institution. In 1852 he received his medical degree. I have no record of the interval between his graduation, in the spring of 1852, and the date of his election to the post of resident physician to the Pennsylvania Hospital, which was September 26, 1853. He served as interne in the Pennsylvania Hospital until about the end of March, 1855.

In the Hospital minutes of March 26, 1855, there is a note to the effect that he was voted a Testimonial which was sealed with the Hospital seal and delivered to him. This Testimonial, or Diploma, was probably identical with that which is still given to internes who have completed their terms of service to the satisfaction of all concerned, and is ranked among the most valuable documents in their possession. After completing his service at the Pennsylvania Hospital, Dr. Forbes went abroad to study military surgery. The schools for such study are, fortunately for mankind, not in continuous session, but, in 1855, a very successful one was in operation in connection with the Crimean war. To it, Dr. Forbes repaired and served as surgeon in the English Military Hospital, at Scutari.

He has told me of the obstacles he encountered in obtaining the official credentials which were absolutely necessary to the success of his undertaking and how he overcame them, but, in the absence of other evidence than that supplied by my memory, I cannot enter into the details of this interesting episode. If he had been endowed with that "mystical lore" which the poet attributes to the "sunset of life," in virtue of which coming events are anticipated, he could not have more wisely ordered his actions at this period. It is true that the shadow of coming war was even then upon our land, but it was so faint and small that the wisest of our statesmen scarcely perceived it and, several years later, when it loomed much darker and more threatening, none recognized its full significance. It is not to be supposed, for a moment, that, in 1855, a young American doctor just out of College, deliberately planned to prepare himself for work on battle-fields shortly to be waged in his own country, but, as already stated, if he had been endowed with the gift of prophecy he could not have acted more wisely.

In recognition of his services in the Crimea, Dr. Forbes was offered a position in the Surgical Corps of the British Army, but declined it because its acceptance involved the renunciation of his citizenship in the United States.

On his return from Europe, he opened a private school of anatomy and operative surgery at the southeast corner of Tenth

Street and College Avenue, now Chant Street, which was largely attended by Southern students. It was suspended during the war but reopened at its close and continued until 1870.

On March 14, 1866, Dr. Forbes received the degree of M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, the subject of his graduating thesis being "On the Treatment of the Wounded Men of the 13th Army Corps during the Siege of Vicksburg." He held an honorable record for services during the Civil War. They are summed up in the following quotation from a circular issued by the Military order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, in memory of their dead companion:

"When the War of the Rebellion broke out, he entered the medical service as Acting Assistant Surgeon, being detailed with Dr. J. H. B. McClellan and Dr. Edward Hartshorne to examine certain candidates desiring to enter the military service. In 1862 he was appointed Surgeon U. S. Volunteers, with the rank of Major, and was assigned to duty as Surgeon of the Port of Philadelphia. He served as Medical Director of the 13th Army Corps until 1863, when he resigned. Afterward he was appointed a Contract Surgeon in charge of the Summit Hospital in Philadelphia. In all military positions he conducted himself with credit, so as to be favorably regarded not only by men of his own profession, but also by his commanding officers."

As this is not intended to be a complete biography, I shall not enter into the details of work performed by Dr. Forbes in the various positions he occupied, the most important of which are the following:

Surgeon to the Hospital of the P. E. Church, 1862-1887; Demonstrator of Anatomy in the Jefferson Medical College, 1879-1886; Professor of Anatomy and Clinical Surgery in the Jefferson Medical College, 1886 to the time of his death. That part of his work in which the Fellows of the College of Physicians are most interested and by which he will be longest remembered is to be found in his contributions to medical science. He was not a voluminous writer. Judging from his published papers, one might suppose him to have made the rule never to write unless he had some

hitherto unnoticed fact to announce or some new idea to suggest. Such a rule, if enforced, would suppress a large percentage, perhaps the major part, of so-called medical literature: a consummation devoutly to be wished from every standpoint except that of the tradesman. Few though his papers are, they are all suggestive and would all repay a careful study. A review of each of them would be out of place in this memoir, but a brief reference to some of the most important seems to me imperative.

The most interesting and, in its results, the most important of Dr. Forbes' publications is his "History of the Anatomical Act of Pennsylvania," "prepared in accordance with the request of the W. S. Forbes Anatomical League of Jefferson Medical College." It is not only interesting as a narrative of the events which culminated in the passage of the Act in question but as showing incidentally though necessarily, and in the most modest manner possible, the part taken by himself in placing the study of anatomy on a legitimate and orderly basis.

On February 6, 1867, at a stated meeting of this College, Dr. Forbes offered the following resolution: "Resolved, That a committee of three be appointed to present the views of this College to the legislature of the State, urging the passage of a law sanctioning the dissection of dead human bodies."

At that time Dr. Forbes had been teaching anatomy and operative surgery in this city for ten years to classes numbering, in the aggregate, more than one thousand students and, to use his own words, "might be supposed to know something of the difficulties in the way of obtaining sufficient material for practically teaching so large a number of young gentlemen."

In his remarks upon his resolution he speaks of the "degrading traffic" in dead bodies which was encouraged by the non-existence of such an Act as he had drawn up for presentation to the legislature, and it is a singular and ironical fact that, about fifteen years later, he should be falsely accused of engaging in this very "traffic" which he had stigmatized as "degrading" and done his best to suppress.

Dr. Forbes read the Act which he proposed to submit to the

legislature and which had already been defeated by that body when presented by him during the preceding winter. It was because of this defeat that he asked for its sanction by the College and the appointment of a committee to present it for the second time.

The Resolution was unanimously passed and the following committee appointed:

Dr. W. S. Forbes, Dr. S. D. Gross, Dr. D. Hayes Agnew. Subsequently, Dr. Henry Hartshorne was substituted for Dr. Gross who, because of "professional and other engagements," was unable to accompany the committee to Harrisburg. Without entering into details, it will suffice to state that this committee accomplished its work in the most energetic and efficient manner. Three visits to Harrisburg were made and on April 3, 1867, Dr Forbes reported to the College that the Act which he had read before that body on February 6, had been signed by Governor Geary on March 18.

In a few years, difficulties arose concerning the distribution of unclaimed bodies, difficulties with the Coroner who "owned and conducted at this time the Philadelphia School of Anatomy." In an editorial in the *Medical News* for December 9, 1882, entitled "Body Snatching," it is stated that the "law of 1867 directs that unclaimed bodies shall be delivered to the medical colleges for dissection in proportion to the number of their students. Why then," the writer inquires, "should there exist any cause for body-snatching? The chief cause," he replies, "is because the Coroner of this city persistently disregards and disobeys the law." He then proceeds to say that he has "the best authority for stating that the Jefferson Medical College has, in several years, received less than a dozen subjects from the Coroner while his own private rooms for anatomical instruction have had an abundant supply."

It is evident that this editorial was not written, or inspired, by Dr. Forbes for its quotation of the Act of 1867 is fundamentally incorrect.

At a meeting of the Association of Anatomists, held at the College of Physicians during the last week of 1882, for the purpose of revising and extending the Act of 1867, Dr. Forbes moved that the

words "give permission" be stricken out and the word "deliver" be substituted so that the Act would read "that Coroners (and other mentioned officials) shall deliver such body or bodies," etc. The Coroner, who was present at the meeting, objected but the resolution was carried and the words "shall deliver" are now contained in the Act signed by Governor Pattison, on June 13, 1883.

In December, 1882, occurred the most tragic event in the life of Dr. Forbes: his arrest for complicity in the crime of robbing the graves in Lebanon Cemetery of the bodies of the dead. It is a significant fact that he does not mention the day of his arrest in the only place in which I have seen his personal reference to it. He says that it occurred in December, 1882. That was sufficiently precise. He evidently wished to blot out the memory of this terrible day as Job, in the bitterness of his heart, would have blotted out the day of his birth.

The charge of which Dr. Forbes was triumphantly acquitted was, in its nature and possible consequences, calculated to warp and embitter the most genial disposition, and it is possible that it may have had temporarily some such effect upon him. He soon, however, lived down both the false accusation and its effects upon himself and I have heard him describe the whole affair from beginning to end in his customary judicial, not to say didactic, manner, precisely as though he were the attorney for the defence and the prisoner a creature of the imagination. I need scarcely add that every one connected with the prosecution, directly or indirectly, received the severest possible castigation. It was many years, however, before this state of mind became habitual. In his history of the Anatomical Act, Dr. Forbes makes a brief but pathetic reference to the sufferings he endured. Speaking of the newspapers and their vindictiveness, whether real or assumed, he remarks: "The contumely thus cast at me injured me in many ways and, sad enough, it alienated certain friends who were near to me." Such friends could not have been so near as he supposed. One of the sweetest "uses of adversity" is the opportunity it affords to friendship. The maxim that there is something in the misfor-

tune of our best friends that is not displeasing to us,¹ finds a verification that probably never was dreamed of by the cynic who framed it. The warm-hearted man rejoices, not at the misfortune of his friend, but at the opportunity to serve him. Much has been said and written concerning the ingratitude of friends and the folly of friendship and most of it is unjustified. We all expect too much and give too little. The question which each man should put to himself when moralizing *de Amicitia* is not how many friends could I rely on in the day of adversity? but how many of those who regard me as their friend could rely upon me? This is the supreme test, and as there were many, both within and outside of the profession, who could rely upon Dr. Forbes, it was inevitable that he should find many staunch adherents. With these to encourage him whose adoption was tried and whom he grappled to his soul with "hooks of steel," he entered upon the best years of his life. About three years later, in 1886, he received, in his election to the Professorship of Anatomy and Clinical Surgery in the Jefferson Medical College, the highest possible endorsement of his character and abilities. Through the additional revenue derived from this post, he was enabled to devote himself almost exclusively to the work he best loved—that of the teacher. The "practice" of his profession was, with him, as it should be with every one who occupies a Chair in a medical school, subordinate to his collegiate duties.

In April, 1878, in commemoration of the tricentennial anniversary of Harvey's birth, which was on April 1, 1578, Dr. Forbes read before this College a paper entitled: "Harvey and the Transit of the Blood from the Arteries to the Veins 'per Porositates.' " It is a learned argument in favor of the view that Harvey was acquainted with the capillary system of bloodvessels and is entirely based upon the derivation of the word "porositates" which Harvey employs to designate the channels through which the blood passes from the arterial to the venous side of the circulation. After a careful study of this paper together with several others upon

¹ "Daus l'adversité de nos meilleurs amis nous trouvons souvent quelque chose qui ne nous déplaît pas." La Rochefoucauld, maxime No. 241.

Harvey and his discovery, to say nothing of the original text, I have come to the conclusion that, while Harvey may have surmised the existence of an intermediate set of vessels between the arteries and the veins—the so-called capillaries—he did not, in the true sense of the word, *discover* them. This honor was reserved for Malpighi, who, with the aid of the compound microscope, saw the blood corpuscles pass through vessels of extreme tenuity from the arteries into the veins. Dr. Forbes' argument would convince any one who was an etymologist and not a physiologist, but as he himself was both, it seems evident that he was biased by his enthusiastic admiration of the immortal Harvey.

I shall refer specifically to but two other papers of Dr. Forbes. The first of these, entitled "The Removal of Stone in the Bladder," was read at the meeting of the American Surgical Association at Washington on June 1, 1894. In it he describes a new lithotrite and demonstrated by means of an ingenious apparatus designed by his son, Mr. John S. Forbes, mechanical engineer, the measured crushing resistance of vesical calculi and the measured strength of the new instrument. It is the most elaborate of Dr. Forbes' papers and contains, in tabulated form, the results of experiments upon 184 vesical calculi. It is certainly one of the most interesting and valuable contributions that have been made to the subject of lithotripsy.

The last paper to which I shall refer is entitled "Liberation of the Ring-finger in Musicians by Dividing the Accessory Tendons of the Extensor Communis Digitorum Muscles." It was read before the Philadelphia County Medical Society, on January 12, 1898, and is a continuation of a paper read before the same society on November 12, 1884. The best judges of the success of this operation are, of course, the musician operated upon and his instructor, and there is abundant testimony in its favor from both of these sources. Mr. Richard Zeekwer, the director of the Philadelphia Musical Academy, in speaking of its effects, says that one of his pupils, upon whom Dr. Forbes operated, gained in a quarter of an hour what he, himself, had not accomplished after twenty-five years' practice. Before the operation, he, the pupil, "could raise

the finger a quarter of an inch; after it, an inch and a quarter, a gain of a whole inch in a few minutes."

I have selected these papers for special notice because they seem to me best fitted to display the versatility of Dr. Forbes' talents, his erudition, and his power of minute and prolonged investigation. Another biographer might select others for the same reasons and find them equally adapted to his purpose.

Some idea of the character of a man may often be obtained from the internal evidence of his writings, provided these are not strictly limited to scientific subjects; for, as a matter of course, nothing, in the direction indicated, could be deduced from a treatise on quadratic equations or the differential calculus. It would not be difficult for a discerning critic to perceive that Dr. Forbes' papers were written by one with a strong sense of rectitude, a corresponding hatred of injustice, a warm heart and, perhaps, an overweening partiality for his friends. The last-mentioned trait is most plainly evident in his treatise on Harvey which is practically an attempt to confer upon the immortal physiologist an honor to which the best authorities upon the subject believe he was not entitled.

No matter how fully the character of a man may be revealed by his writings, nothing from this source can be deduced concerning his personality. With regard to this I will merely say that it was such as

"To give the world assurance of a man."

His full-length portrait presented by the alumni of the two great medical schools from which he was graduated, hangs in the anatomical theatre of Jefferson Medical College, and it is to be hoped that at some day, in the near future, a copy of it will be added to the portraits which adorn our walls.

There is, in our language, a word that has been so much abused and misapplied that it is likely to become obsolete, and yet it is the word which every one who knew him inevitably associates with Dr. Forbes. It has no synonym but requires, for its definition, a concrete example. We all immediately recognize that which the wisest cannot define. It is the word "gentleman," and Dr. Forbes was one of its truest exemplars. Ever courteous and considerate

in his relations to all, high and low, rich and poor, with, at the same time, a proper sense of the dignity of his social and professional standing, his manner was such as to repel the familiarity of the chance acquaintance and invite the confidence of his friends. It was no surface polish. I have seen him under the most various circumstances, and whether presiding as a genial host at his own table or suffering, with stoical fortitude, the severest pangs that afflict the human frame, he was a model for imitation. In the hour of death he was serene and undismayed and was literally

“Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.”

On the evening of Monday, December 11, 1905, I was summoned to see him in consultation with his old friend and associate, Dr. Addinell Hewson, and found him suffering from a well-marked attack of angina pectoris, with which he had been seized at the close of his evening lecture. He was speedily relieved; in fact, thanks to the prompt treatment of Dr. Hewson, he was recovering from the attack when I arrived at the house. The next morning we saw him again and found him sitting up and apparently completely restored to his usual health. However, he was not deceived as to his condition, but was well aware that, as he expressed it, the “central organ of the circulation” was at fault. On the following Sunday (December 17, 1905) I was hastily summoned to his house and found him dead on my arrival. This is the brief story of his last illness. Like John Hunter, Hilton Fagge, and many others whom I might name, he died at his post, and if it is sweet and fitting (“*dulce et decorum*”) to die for one’s country on the field of battle, how much more so is it to die in the discharge of the duties of a profession whose object is not to destroy the lives of men, but to save them.

There is an epitaph of a medieval Spanish scholar¹ which sums up the life of a good man better than anything of the sort of which I have knowledge. It is, as a matter of course, in that language to which the scholar instinctively resorts when in search of the

¹ Alvaro Gomez de Castro, author of the celebrated biography of Cardinal Ximenez.

choicest morsels of condensed expression and may be translated:
I have never wittingly injured anyone; I have endeavored to benefit
as many as possible.

"Nemini sciens nocui
Prodesse quam pluribus curavi."

It might be appropriately inscribed upon the tomb of our late
Fellow.